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'Honest man' fights for truth

India's Desai battling charges of links to the CIA

By Nadine Epstein

Former Indian Prime Minister Morarji Desai rises at 4 a.m. each day to pray, fasts one day each fortnight to cleanse his body and drinks his own urine daily. Having little faith in modern medicine, the 90-year-old statesman has not been to a doctor in more than 50 years.

But while the ascetic nonagenarian radiates a simplicity and well-being that admits no worries in this life, he has at least one. He is concerned that his historical reputation may have been tarnished by the words of Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Seymour Hersh, so concerned that he has flown 29 hours each way between Bombay and Chicago twice since May, 1984, to pursue a \$100 million libel suit against Hersh and the publishing firm of Simon & Schuster.

Hersh, in his 1983 book, "The Price of Power," identified Desai as a Central Intelligence Agency informant who was paid \$20,000 a year during the Johnson administration and who divulged Indian cabinet secrets in 1971.

"I had no connection with the CIA," Desai says. "I was in parliament [in 1971]. He says I passed cabinet secrets, but I was in the opposition. I couldn't have had any access [to secrets]."

While many Americans do not remember him as a pivotal part of Indian politics, Desai is big news at home. He has been a major, controversial powerbroker on the Indian political scene since the 1940s. So it was no surprise that Hersh's accusations received headline coverage in Indian newspapers, embarrassing the former prime minister.

A veteran of the Indian nationalist movement, the slightly built Desai took over the helm of the Indian nation and its 713 million people in 1973 when Indira Gandhi was voted out of office after invoking emergency powers that observers worried would lead to a Gandhi family dynasty.

Desai headed the Janata [People's] Party coalition but resigned two years later when the coalition disintegrated. His administration was filled with dissension.

"You see, if somebody said I was a bad prime minister I wouldn't bother about it," Desai says. "But when they say I was a traitor to my country, it takes away our

whole character. That is where the whole issue comes in."

Desai's ire was aroused when a Chicago-based organization known as Indians Abroad for Truth called and asked him to sue Hersh, offering to cover his expenses.

"They phoned to me in Bombay in 1984 and said that this is an insult to the whole nation, not only to me, and asked me to file a case," Desai says. "If I said no, there would be a presumption that I had something to hide."

"The majority of Indians remember Desai because he is one of our oldest leaders," says supporter Bhailal Patel, chairman of Indians Abroad for Truth. "He has always lived a spiritual life, and people in India know that and admire him."

"Does Desai want little children in the Gujarti [an Indian state] school system to learn that Morarji Desai betrayed his country to the Americans?" asks Susanne Rudolph, professor of political science at the University of Chicago and head of the school's South Asian Languages and Area Center.

"Desai's a man of great rectitude and stubbornness. He has a relatively dignified past. He has what he considers is a right conviction, but God help you if you are on the other side."

Although Desai has made many enemies over the years, Rudolph believes that "Morarji Desai wouldn't be bought."

"Even people who are inimical to him support him in this," she says, adding that she believes that Hersh's statements are "certainly incompatible with an understanding of the man and Indian politics."

Understanding the man and Indian politics is not easy.

Much of Desai's political life and national image reflects his very personal philosophy that has its roots in the 700-verse Bhagavad-gita that he says he knows entirely by heart. His philosophy also reflects the strong influence exerted on his life by Mahatma Gandhi, the revered leader with whom Desai has tried to build an association over the years.

"Desai is an old Gandhian," Rudolph says. "This means you construe yourself as doing public service."

"I believe in serving human needs," Desai said, "and politics is a part of life. If I get out of it I'll not be sorry. If I get in it I'll not be

worried. My philosophy has always been: Do the work that comes your way. I have never sought anything in my life that I have done."

That includes serving as prime minister, he said, although his role in the political maneuverings of the Janata Party is well recorded.

"That also I didn't ask for," he said. "They selected me. They were surprised that I went to sleep [on election night]. They thought I would be working, asking somebody. I didn't ask somebody. I didn't ask any one man to propose me."

Still, Desai has omitted some details that do not support his claims. He was the center of attention during the move to replace Indira Gandhi. As finance minister in the 1960s, he had enormous influence on his country and enjoyed the public attention, often going out of his way to pose for publicity photos with other world leaders.

At first, Desai refuses to talk about his time in office, then, suddenly sounding more like a politician, the former prime minister recalls that most Indians had good memories of his policies of encouraging agriculture and small-scale high-tech industries.

"They remember it for the easy prices that they had and the easy way things were available," he says. "They say that there was never such a time before in all these years."

And despite his emphasis on the spiritual life, he admits that there are conflicts.

"To live in truth is difficult in India as well as anywhere, but in America there is more material life," he says. "Very few people can keep control over themselves—anywhere."

"Is there any country where they say honesty is wrong? They say honesty is the best policy, but how many honest men are there?"

Still, he insists, he is an honest man. Selfishness, he says, is not part of his persona.

"I am able to get over it because I have no ambition," he says. "My ambition in life is only to realize truth."

Rudolph, for one, does not accept his claim of perfection.

"He is not a perfect man; he's a man of great ambition. He is flawed. For example, he closed his eyes to what his son has done."

"His son used his father's position to advance himself, and Mo-

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rarji couldn't restrain him," she says, referring to the controversial wealth amassed by Kantilal Desai. Morarji pushed his son to become defense minister when he was elected to the prime ministership.

And while Morarji likes to be compared to Mahatma Gandhi, he is not considered Gandhi's equal at home, according to Rudolph: "He hasn't convinced people that he has lived the same kind of selfless life that Gandhi convinced people he was living.

"The three old men of the Janata Party—Chandrah Singh, Jagjivan Ram and Desai—were so determined to deny each other the prime ministership that they destroyed the possibility of a viable opposition party in India. Their collaboration was selfish and shortsighted."

Indian distrust of Desai also can be attributed to what Rudolph calls his "extraordinary self-righteousness."

Like others who possess strong beliefs, Desai can be relatively inflexible on issues and is apt to lecture people.

"When he was minister of Bombay, a very cosmopolitan city, the first thing he did was institute prohibition," Rudolph says. "Then when he became prime minister he extended it nationwide." When he no longer led the nation, prohibition was repealed.

"Mahatma Gandhi's righteousness was tempered by great humanity, a sense of humor and a willingness to compromise," says Rudolph. "For Gandhi, the truth was much more multifaceted. For Desai, the truth is single-faceted."

And the truth, Desai insists, is that he was misrepresented by Hersh. So even if it means more 29-hour flights to Chicago from India, he will continue his legal battle.

"God calls me," he says. "I have to come."

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